

## Chapter 179

Ava felt the odd sensation of the magic around her as Mr. Hansson talked. And behind her, she could see the three Council members.

It was like everything was heightened out here.

The forest leading to the school had been her first introduction to the evil that surrounded her daily, but it felt more threatening here than around school.

Almost as if what resided here was never meant to be seen.

She could sense it, whatever it was. Creatures like the ones she had seen? Or something much worse?

There were so many sounds, living things prowling the forest behind her. She heard a growl in the distance, and the hair rose on the back of her neck. Goosebumps rose on her arms under her blazer. Whatever that was not something she had seen before. She didn't dare to look back.

“Do you know why this campus is my favorite?” Mr. Hansson continued. “It’s not just because I send all the future leaders here. And it’s not just because the security is so impenetrable.”

The way he said it made it seem as if even if she and Zeke had got this far, they would never have made it past whatever was in there. There was a whine and another growl from the forest.

More than one. There was more than one of those monsters.

She closed her eyes and let out a breath to focus. The protective magic wouldn’t work well if she and Zeke let their emotions get the better of them.

“It’s because this forest has exceeded my expectations. It’s like having my eyes and ears constantly on the academy.”

Dread filled her stomach as she opened her eyes to look at the Head of the Council. She’d assumed he had a way to spy on the academy, but she hadn’t thought it was the very thing that trapped them there. Had he seen everything? She struggled to keep her mind off the things she didn’t want him to see. Even with the protective magic swirling in her body, it was hard to keep the dark magic in the air at bay.

Mr. Hansson’s magic gripped her all of a sudden. It felt like the darkness from the forest behind her wrapped around her, and she couldn’t move a muscle. Just like the day in training after Emily had been killed, only a lot worse. This magic felt more dangerous.

The air was pushed from her lungs as the magic tightened around her.

This was the kind of power these people had, and she was supposed to go against them. Impossible. They would never win.

“Imagine my surprise when, out of the blue, somebody offered the forest several bloody treats,” Mr. Hansson said as he strolled over to stand in front of her. “and then disappeared like a ghost.”

His purple eyes pierced through her, and she started to lose focus. Mr. Patrick’s magic protected her mind but not her body. She had already known that there may be some pain involved, but she didn’t think anyone could ever completely prepare for that. She breathed through her nose and tried to focus on Zeke as she had always done. She needed to maintain her focus.

“Do you know the last time anything entered this forest?” he continued. “Decades ago. A student who couldn’t take his responsibilities anymore. He lasted only a few seconds before he was completely useless to me. The forest spat him back out, just a shell of himself. I had to destroy him.”

Destroy him? Kill him. He had killed him.

The dark magic slithered against her. She could feel it against her skin as if she was naked. When it wrapped itself around her neck, she sucked in a breath. She was defenseless. All it would take for him to snap her neck would be a little twitch of his eyes or a flick of his wrist.

But the magic settled on her mark. It felt like a lick. A disgusting, scratchy lick that made her feel sick, Revulsion worked through her body, but she couldn’t move away.

And then she felt her link to Zeke fade like the magic had muted it somehow. She tried to turn her head to look at Zeke, but she could only move her eyes. What was this magic doing to their bond? Mr. Hansson had already said mate bonds were easy to break. Was that what he was trying to do?

“But the sacrifices you gave to the forest in pieces were almost perfect. I’ve never thought of building my army like that was possible until you showed me how to do it,” he continued. “Imagine that. I’ve lived so long, but a little girl came along and showed me something new.”

He stepped closer to her. She could feel his breath on her face as he looked into her eyes. Something probed her mind, but she pulled her focus away from what was happening to her bond and pushed it back. She could still feel her protective magic despite everything.

The man in front of her smiled as if she had done something right, as if he was proud of her.

“They don’t need to be whole for the forest to claim them. I did not think that was possible,” he continued. “It’s a pity we had to use those wolves like that yesterday, but honestly, they weren’t quite right in the head. One of them had this fixation with your mate that was so annoying to deal with.”

Mr. Hansson shook his head and looked at Zeke. He was talking as if they were discussing something casual, like dinner options, instead of the fact that she had killed people.

But building an army by giving them to the darkness in the forest? The man was insane. She should have guessed that when she saw Claire and her friends.

“Anyway, there was preparing to send my councilors to find out who had given me this gift when you walked into my forest like a lost little lamb. You walked in further than anyone has ever done, but my forest couldn’t claim you. You resisted it. To say I was intrigued is putting it mildly,” he chuckled. “And then, just when I thought I had you, your knight in shining armor arrived. He tore down the place as if he was completely at home. Not once, but two times.”

He walked over to stand in front of Zeke. She followed him with her eyes and saw him practically salivate as he looked at her mate.

“A demon right under my nose all these years. You ripped through my beasts and made them tremble in their domain. You made them retreat. So I just had to come and see you for myself.”

Mr. Hansson stepped back and turned to look at the school gates again.

“How did you do it, Ezekiel How did you hide such a monster from me for so long, even from the forest?”

Zeke didn’t answer him. Mr. Hansson turned back, and his eyes flashed briefly. The magic around her tightened again, making her gasp as pain shot through her body.

And then she felt Zeke's emotions go haywire, even with their muted bond. This was how the Council was going to get their answers. They would use their bond against them,

The magic tightened so much it partially lifted her off the ground, and Zeke let out a growl.